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THE DRAMA STARTS ITS SPRING DRIVE

BY HENRY McDONALD SPENCER

DOSTOIEVSKY said somewhere, something to the effect, that in fiction, as in life, there are no general principles, only special cases. So with the drama. Indeed, much more so with the drama. And that is why I hold in disesteem (a) the dramatist who takes himself seriously as a philosopher or teacher; (b) the critic who takes the dramatist, any dramatist, seriously as a philosopher or teacher.

There can be no general principles deduced from an individual instance (except by a woman who, for example, would infer that all blonde men are deceivers because, forsooth, she had been deceived by one blonde man), and an individual instance is all that can be dealt with in one play. Take for illustration the tribal taboos against those who violate the medieval custom of matrimony: How could a valid conclusion be reached as to whether marriage, extra-marital unions or celibacy were preferable, unless a rateable proportion of all marriages, all free unions, and all cases of celibacy were considered. Furthermore, is individual happiness the sole consideration?

It would be impossible, even if sufficient data were obtainable (which it is not), to turn the stage into a card-indexed system or tabulating machine for computing and analysing results.

That A and B are happier by living together in defiance of convention does not prove that C and D are not better off in a state of open matrimony. Therefore all plays like *Why Marry?*, *The Madonna of the Future*, *Karen, Youth*, *The Master*, and other recent stage offerings written around

theories of revolt against conventions, are invalid as briefs and are only to be appraised in the light of their dramaturgic and æsthetic merit. The trouble with free love is not that it is a revolt but that it entails all of the platitudes of marriage without many of its compensations. The objection to the polemical play, no matter what you may prove, is, as Flaubert has said of the novel, that some one else may prove exactly the contrary. Indeed, the standard-bearer of the crusade against traditions is becoming almost as much of a village pest as his fellow in the opposite camp—the moral meddler who would stuff us all into a strait-jacket.

What we ask of the serious dramatist is simply this: That he induce in us a pleasurable æsthetic emotion and at the same time stimulate and satisfy the intellect. Granting his premises, he must reason logically from those premises and synchronously gratify our senses and emotional nature.

These conditions were complied with in *The Master*, by Herman Bahr, and the play is one of the most entertaining and satisfying that has been presented in New York this season. It is informed with a fine wit and subtle irony, and the theme is of universal interest, to wit: It is very difficult, in fact almost impossible, for any man, even a master of his emotions and a pure thinker, to overcome entirely the urge of his feelings. The inherited instincts of the centuries are stronger than the most carefully reasoned determination to pursue, in a given emergency, a line of conduct which a man's intellect may tell him is the best. Arnold Daly gave a very dis-

tinguished and satisfactory rendition of the intellectual man who conceived himself to be above jealousy, and a very fair portrayal of his torture when the wife repaid him in his own coin. Daly is entirely too good an actor, in spite of a tendency to a certain thickening or stiffness, to be wasted in the wilds of Wall Street, or in the purely trivial occupation of money-making, as he threatened.

A revival of the almost lost art of acting in the grand manner, when the actor came to be much more important than the play itself, was seen in Lionel Barrymore's performance of *The Copperhead*, by Augustus Thomas. It is not fair to the author to assume, however, that the play was not well enough done, or that Mr. Barrymore would have made his success had not the dramatist worked up the big fourth act with consummate skill. The perfect technical machinery—the business—provided by the playwright in that act made it almost actor proof. The mask of Lincoln, the cast of his hand, the flag, and the coat changing scene, where the old veteran who had hated and despised the presumed copperhead for forty years finds out that Milt Shanks was the most self-sacrificing patriot the war had produced, all combined to make the most theatrically effective scene our stage has witnessed for many a day.

Parenthetically it may be noted that the word "theatrical" has fallen into disrepute of recent years and conveys a covert sneer even when applied to things of the theatre. This is entirely wrong. It should be a term of praise in connection with the things of the theatre. To say that a play is theatrical is, in the true sense of the word, on all fours with saying that a man is manly or that a woman is womanly.

To return to Mr. Thomas's play: There is a great deal of chaff to be consumed before the oats are reached, and the earlier

acts were heavy-footed and dull. As almost the entire history of what had gone before was recapitulated in the last act it leads one to wonder if the play couldn't be arranged as a one act play, using the fourth act only, with such modifications or additions as would be necessary to coherence. Mr. Thomas is to be thanked, however, for taking us away from the overdone subject of matrimony for at least one evening.

It was due for the Washington Square Players to toss their brick at the conventions, and *Youth* by Miles Malleson was the result. As the play concerned the most unrepresentative class of people in the world,—players,—I do not suppose that we were asked to take it very seriously as a "slice of life" or as a contribution to the problem of to marry or not to marry. The setting, the "back" of a theatre, was very interesting, and must have intrigued the average auditor immensely; although it may be said that the Washington Square audiences are by no means average audiences and give one the impression of being quite worthy of the excellent company and plays they patronise.

One of the most thoroughly enjoyable plays of last month is *Her Country* by Rudolph Besier and Sylvia Spottiswood, an English play which has had an immense, and deserved, success in London. This play, has not had nearly the amount of notice and publicity to which it is entitled both on account of its merits as a play and its war-time significance. It is a mordant satire on the Prussian point of view especially in relation to domestic affairs, and it is a reflection on our provincialism that we do not better appreciate it. Satire is essentially within the province of the stage, and in this respect may be obliquely educational. In any event I would sentence every pacifist and pro-German in New York to spend an evening at *Her*

Country and pay double rates for the privilege. The leading part is taken by Rosa Lynd (Lady Chetwynde), a New York girl, who, I believe, was unknown previously on our stage here. Miss Lynd gives an intelligent and sympathetic rendering of the part of an American girl who marries that fine flower of civilisation, the noblest work of God—a Prussian officer. If any man wants to know what we are fighting for let him see *Her Country*.

The Off Chance, by R. C. Carton, is a *Lord and Lady Algy* sort of play but gives Ethel Barrymore an opportunity to show what a really fine and sympathetic comedienne she can be. Her rounded womanliness is not the least of her attractions. Although it is not my custom to dwell much on the merits of performers, I cannot refrain from mentioning E. Lyall Swete in his characterisation of Lord Cardonnell, the good-natured English sporting peer without a trace of "side." Swete's work will stand out in my theatrical portrait gallery as one of the notable achievements of the year.

Booth Tarkington's *Seventeen* is a pecu-

liarly representative American play and displays the Eternal Boy as no one had pictured him since Mark Twain. Every man will heave a sigh of sympathy at the pathetic trials and tribulations of the young hero, and realise that youth has its bitterness and mortifications no less poignant than those of maturity. Childhood is, with the majority, the most unhappy period of life. As presented by Mr. Stuart Walker's company the performance is entirely adequate if not distinguished.

Remains two farces with titles curiously alike, *Sick-a-bed*, by Ethel Watts Mumford, and *A Cure for Curables*, by Earl Derr Biggers and Lawrence Whitman. *Sick-a-bed* is easily the better piece of funning and is the more logical. There is no class of play which requires, within its conventions, a more thorough application of the principles of logic than the farce. The situations were unforced and the humor arises naturally therefrom. *A Cure for Curables* pulls rather a labored oar and the scene in the sanitarium is reminiscent of musical comedy and of farce of the mid-Rutherford B. Hayes period.

BOOKS RECEIVED

(To be reviewed in next issue)

THESE MANY YEARS. Recollections of a New Yorker, by Brander Matthews. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917.

FURTHER MEMORIES, by Lord Redesdale, G.C.V.O., G.C.B. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 681 Fifth Avenue.

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN, by James Joyce. New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1917.

UNICORNS, by James Huneker. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917.

THE EARTHQUAKE, by Arthur Train. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918.

PER AMICA SILENTIA LUNAE, by William Butler Yeats. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918.

PORTRAITS AND BACKGROUNDS, by Evangeline Wilbour Blashfield. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917.

A DEFENSE OF IDEALISM. Some Questions and Conclusions, by May Sinclair. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN, by May Sinclair. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917.

INTIMATE PRUSSIA, by A. Raymond. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1917.

IS CIVILIZATION A DISEASE? by Stanton Coit. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917.